

Birthday

Tui

Heliotropism, or solar tracking, is when a plant follows the movement of the sun during the day. Rooted in ancient Greek, “helio” refers to the sun and “tropism” means a turning or movement of a living organism toward or away from an external stimulus, such as light, heat or gravity. The sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) is the best example of a plant that displays this phenomenon. Young sunflower plants follow the sun from east to west during the day and then, reorient themselves during the night to face east in anticipation of the sunrise.

Day One: The Realization

The morning started like any other.

I was at my station before the sun had fully risen, the way I'd been for weeks now—consumed by the sleeve design that had become my obsession, my creative crucible, the project that would either prove I was the artist I believed I could be or expose me as someone reaching beyond his grasp. The protea was finally right. After months of struggle, after countless failed attempts, after Lego's patient teaching in that greenhouse full of impossible flowers, I had finally captured something true.

I thought about that day often. The greenhouse. The humid air that smelled like growth and possibility. Lego standing among the flowers, explaining their secrets with a passion that transformed him—made him seem less like the bright, bouncing boy I'd been keeping at arm's length and more like someone ancient, someone who understood things about life and beauty that most people never learned.

That was the day everything shifted. The day I stopped pretending I didn't feel what I felt.

The heliconia curved exactly as it should. The bird of paradise spread its wings with the particular grace I'd been chasing since the beginning. Every petal, every shadow, every carefully rendered detail was in place, waiting for the moment when paper would become skin and the design would live forever on someone's body.

My client's final consultation was this afternoon. Everything needed to be perfect.

I was so deep in the work—checking line weights, adjusting gradients, making micro-corrections that probably only I would notice—that the sound of the studio door barely registered. Footsteps crossed the floor. The creak of the chair at the reception desk. The soft click of the computer waking from sleep.

Normal sounds. Routine sounds. The particular soundtrack of another day at Ink & Ashes.

I didn't look up. Didn't need to. Hong always arrived around this time, settling into his station with the quiet efficiency that had become familiar over the months we'd worked together. He would check messages, review the day's appointments, maybe start some preliminary sketches for his exhibition pieces. We'd exchange minimal words until the coffee kicked in and the day properly began. But something made me glance up anyway. Some instinct, some shift in the air, some quality of silence that felt different from the usual morning quiet.

The morning had been going too well. That should have been my first warning—the smooth, uneventful start, the quiet studio, the sense that everything was exactly where it should be. I was behind the counter reviewing the week's appointments, feeling the particular satisfaction that came from having finished the sleeve design. Weeks of work, finally complete. The protea and heliconia and bird of paradise, all rendered in a way that felt alive, felt true. The client had approved everything. All that remained was the actual tattooing.

I should have been celebrating. Should have been feeling accomplished, ready to move on to the next project with the lightness that came from finishing something difficult.

Instead, I was about to discover that I was an idiot.

Hong was at the reception desk, bent over the computer, doing something administrative. He'd arrived early—earlier than usual—with a purposefulness I'd attributed to the exhibition stress. Only eight days until his paintings would hang on gallery walls. Eight days until strangers would stand in front of his soul rendered in oil and canvas.

There was a gift bag next to him.

I noticed it in stages. First as peripheral awareness—something colorful occupying space on the desk. Then as specific recognition. Matte black paper. Tissue paper in shades of pink and lavender peeking from the top. The kind of careful presentation that suggested real thought had gone into whatever was inside.

A gift bag.

I stared at it.

My brain—still half-lost in the world of flowers and ink and the intricate geometry of the sleeve design—struggled to process what I was seeing. A gift bag. Hong had brought a gift bag. Why would Hong bring a gift bag to the studio? What occasion required—And then, like a physical blow, understanding struck.

Lego's birthday.

Lego's twentieth birthday, and I had forgotten.

The birthday I had marked on my calendar weeks ago, when he'd mentioned it casually during one of our late-night phone calls—the ones that had become a ritual, both of us talking until we could barely keep our eyes open, sharing parts of ourselves we'd hidden from everyone else.

"My birthday's coming up," he'd said, his voice soft in that particular way it got when he was saying something that mattered but didn't want it to seem like it mattered. "Not a big deal or anything."

"It's a big deal," I'd told him. "You're turning twenty. That's significant."

"Is it?"

"It is to me."

The memory of that conversation hit me now with the force of a train. He'd sounded so uncertain, so unused to the idea that his birthday could matter to anyone. And I'd promised him—not in words, but in tone, in implication—that it would be different this year. That I would be different.

And I had forgotten.

"Shit."

The word escaped before I could stop it, sharp and loud in the quiet studio. Hong's head snapped up immediately, his attention shifting from the screen to my face with the alertness of someone who had learned to read trouble in a single syllable.

"What?"

I couldn't answer. I was staring at the gift bag like it had personally betrayed me, like the careful arrangement of tissue paper was somehow responsible for my failure.

"Tui." Hong's voice was sharper now. "What's wrong?"

"The gift bag," I managed. "That's for—"

"Lego." Hong's expression shifted through surprise, disbelief, and finally horror. "You... you know that, right? You've been planning something?"

"I forgot."

The silence that followed was devastating.

Hong stared at me, his face cycling through emotions I couldn't name. When he finally spoke, his voice carried the weight of a verdict. "No." His voice was flat, already anticipating, already judging. "No, you didn't."

"Hong—"

"You couldn't have forgotten." He pushed back from the desk, turning to face me fully, and there was something in his eyes that looked almost like disappointment. "You two are—whatever you are. Dating. Almost dating. Something that requires remembering important dates."

"I know—"

"After everything—after the greenhouse and the confessions and all the walks home from the flower shop—"

"I know."

"And you forgot his birthday?"

The accusation was fair. More than fair. I deserved every ounce of judgment in Hong's voice. I had finally stopped running from love, had finally let myself be vulnerable with someone who mattered, had finally built something real and precious—And I had forgotten his birthday.

"I only found out a few weeks ago," I said, the words defensive even though I knew they were inadequate. "I marked it on my calendar. I was going to plan something —"

"Well, you forgot anyway."

"I know."

"The sleeve design?"

"Yes." The admission was painful. "I got so focused on finishing it, on making sure everything was perfect for the client, that I just—I lost track of time. I lost track of everything."

Hong leaned back in his chair, running a hand through his silver hair. "The man texts you constantly. He brought you tea that blooms like hope in hot water. He's been showing up at this studio for months—"

"I know."

"And you forgot his birthday."

"Hong." I set down the tablet, resisting the urge to throw it across the room. "I know. I'm aware. I don't need you to tell me how badly I've messed up. I need you to help me figure out how to fix it."

Something in my voice must have gotten through, because Hong's expression shifted. The judgment was still there, but beneath it was something else—the look

of someone already starting to problem-solve.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. We have one day. What can we do in one day?"

I thought about the last time I'd seen Lego—two days ago, when he'd stopped by the studio on his way to class. He'd been wearing that ridiculous oversized sweater that made him look even smaller than he was. He'd bounced through the door like he always did, all sunshine and energy, and thrown himself into my arms like it was the most natural thing in the world. And it was. It had become natural over the weeks we'd been together. The way he fit against me. The way his arms wrapped around my neck. The way he made that small sound—half sigh, half hum—when I pulled him close.

I'd kissed his forehead that day. Told him I'd see him soon. Watched him leave with that particular ache that always settled in my chest when he wasn't there.

And I hadn't thought about his birthday once.

The morning became a blur of planning and panic.

Between clients—because clients kept arriving, because the universe apparently had a cruel sense of humor—we huddled at the reception desk with phones out, making lists that grew longer with every passing minute.

"The studio," Hong said during a brief gap between appointments. "We can have it here. After closing time. Transform the space."

"Will that work?"

"It'll have to. We don't have time for anything else."

I nodded, adding notes to my phone. "Decorations. We need decorations."

"I can order online. Express shipping. Hearts and stars—Lego likes that aesthetic. Pastel colors. Something with a 'Happy Birthday' banner."

"Do it."

Hong was already typing. "Food. Real food, not just snacks."

"I can cook—"

"Can you cook for a group on short notice while also decorating and wrapping gifts and not having a nervous breakdown?"

I opened my mouth to argue, then stopped. He had a point.

"Catering," Hong continued. "There's that place near the university—the one Lego likes. They deliver."

"Order enough for everyone."

"Everyone being...?"

"Us. Est, probably." I thought about it. "Nut?"

The name carried weight. Nut—Hong's something. The person who had been patiently pursuing him for months, who had finally gotten through the walls Hong had built.

"Is he part of this now?" I asked carefully.

"He wants to be." Hong's voice was quiet but certain. "He asked how he could help."

"Then yes. Invite him."

The decision was simple. Chosen family grew by choice—by deliberate inclusion. If Hong trusted Nut, if Nut wanted to be part of this, then he belonged.

The bell above the door chimed, announcing my next client. I stood, trying to arrange my features into professional composure.

"Keep planning," I told Hong. "Handle the decorations and food. I'll take care of this appointment and then we'll figure out the rest. The rest includes a cake. Birthdays need cakes."

"I know birthdays need cakes."

"Just making sure. Since you forgot the whole birthday."

"I'm going to regret telling you about this, aren't I?"

"For the rest of your life."

The afternoon brought Est.

He arrived mid-afternoon, camera bag over his shoulder, expression carrying the relaxation of someone who'd just come from a good job. Behind-the-scenes work with a band, he'd mentioned earlier—low-stress photography helping him rebuild his confidence.

"How was the shoot?" Hong asked.

"Good. Really good, actually." Est set down his bag and stretched. "The band was easy to work with. Lots of natural light."

"That's great."

"Yeah." Est's smile was genuine—not forced brightness, but real warmth. "It is."

He looked between us, his photographer's attention catching something in our expressions. "What's wrong? You both look like someone died."

"Tui forgot Lego's birthday."

The words came from Hong, delivered with flat satisfaction. Est's face went through a journey—confusion, understanding, disbelief, exasperated amusement.

"You forgot," Est repeated. "You. The man who's been walking him home every night. The man who literally confessed his love in a greenhouse surrounded by exotic flowers."

"I was focused on the sleeve design—"

"The sleeve design." Est sat down heavily in one of the waiting chairs, shaking his head. "Of course, I'm teasing. Mostly." His expression softened. "What's the plan?"

"Party here. Decorations are ordered. Food is arranged. But we still need a cake, and everywhere is booked—"

"I can help with that." We both turned to look at him. Est was already pulling out his phone, scrolling through contacts. "I did work for a bakery a few months ago. Marketing photos. The owner likes me. Let me see what I can do."

He stepped outside to make the call. Through the window, we watched him pacing the sidewalk, making gestures that suggested negotiation was happening.

"I can't believe you forgot." Hong said after a moment.

"I know."

"I really can't believe it."

"Hong."

"No, I'm serious. Of all the people—you, who spent months being terrified to get close to anyone. You finally let someone in, and then—"

"I know." The words came out sharper than I intended. "I've been beating myself up about it since I realized. I don't need you to pile on."

Hong was quiet, studying my face. When he spoke again, his voice was gentler.

"You're really upset about this."

"Of course I'm upset. I care about him. I care about him more than I've cared about anyone in years, and I couldn't even remember his birthday. What does that say about me?"

"It says you got overwhelmed. It says you're human." Hong stood and crossed to where I was sitting, putting a hand on my shoulder briefly. "It doesn't say anything about how much you care. It just says you made a mistake."

"What if he's hurt? What if he thinks I forgot because he doesn't matter?"

"Then you explain. You apologize. You show him with actions that he matters more than anything." Hong's voice was steady. "That's what people who love each other do. They mess up, and then they make it right."

Est returned before I could respond, his phone already back in his pocket, his smile suggesting victory. "Cake is handled. My friend is going to make something special. It'll be ready tomorrow afternoon—I just have to pick it up."

"What kind?"

"Vanilla with strawberry filling. They're decorating it with edible flowers." His smile widened. "And they're making it star-shaped."

The relief that flooded through me was almost physical—a loosening of the knot in my chest. The cake was handled. The food was arranged. The decorations were ordered.

We closed at seven—earlier than usual, but necessary.

The shopping trip was chaotic in the best way.

"Paper plates or real ones?" Hong asked.

"Real ones. It's a birthday."

"That seems excessive."

"It seems like showing up properly. Lego notices things like that."

Hong didn't argue. We added plates to the cart.

It was in the second store—a department store with a home goods section—that I found it.

I'd wandered away from the others, following an instinct I couldn't name, moving through aisles of kitchen supplies until I reached a display near the back. Tea sets. Cups and pots and accessories, arranged with careful attention.

And there, on the middle shelf, I saw them.

The cups were beautiful. They were clearly inspired by Alice in Wonderland—whimsical designs in soft pastels, aqua and pink and touches of gold. The illustrations were delicate and dreamlike: a rabbit with a pocket watch, a cat's

mysterious smile, mushrooms and flowers and playing cards scattered across the porcelain surfaces.

I thought about Lego's apartment. About the tea set he used every morning—the cups worn from years of use, the pattern fading, one cup missing entirely because it had broken long ago. He'd mentioned it once, almost in passing, the way you mentioned things that mattered but that you'd stopped hoping anyone would notice.

"One of the cups broke last year. I keep meaning to find a replacement, but nothing matches."

These cups wouldn't match either. But they would be beautiful. They would be his—chosen specifically for him, because I had been paying attention, because I understood who he was and what he loved.

I checked the price tag and winced—definitely more expensive than I would usually spend. But this wasn't about practicality. This was about meaning.

"Found something?" Est appeared beside me.

"Yeah. I think so."

He looked at the cups, at the price tag, at my face. His smile widened slowly.

"Those are perfect. He's going to love them."

"You think?"

"I know. They're exactly right."

I took the set to the counter and asked for gift wrapping. The woman was careful with the paper, making the presentation as beautiful as the contents. When she was done, the package looked like something from a fairy tale—wrapped in pale pink paper, tied with a white ribbon.

We emerged from the store loaded with bags. The sun was setting, painting the sky in shades of gold and orange.

And then we ran into Nut.

He was standing on the sidewalk just outside, looking slightly uncertain, like someone who wasn't sure if they belonged. When he saw us emerge, his expression shifted—relief, hope.

"I thought I might find you here," he said, eyes finding Hong first. "I texted earlier—"

"I saw." Hong's voice was neutral, but there was warmth underneath. "Sorry I didn't respond. We've been busy."

"I can see that." Nut gestured at our bags. "The party?"

"The party."

There was a moment of awkward silence. Then Nut smiled—the smile of someone deciding to be brave.

"Can I help? I have my car. I could drive things wherever they need to go."

Hong looked at me. I looked at Est. Est shrugged.

"That would be helpful," I said. "Thank you."

We transferred bags—decorations to Nut's car, which would transport them to my apartment. The gift bag with the tea set stayed with me, too precious to risk. At one point, Nut reached for a bag at the same moment as Hong. Their hands brushed. Hong didn't pull away—didn't flinch or create distance. He just paused, something shifting in his expression, and let Nut take the bag.

"I can drive Hong home," Nut offered. "It's on my way."

"It's not on your way at all." Hong said, but there was no resistance in his voice.

"It is now."

They looked at each other for a moment. Then Hong nodded.

"Text me when you get there." I told Hong.

Hong snorted, but he was smiling as he climbed into Nut's car. Through the window, I could see Nut reaching over, taking Hong's hand—a gesture so natural it must have been becoming habit. Hong didn't pull away. His ears were pink, but his smile was genuine.

"I can't believe what I just saw." Est said quietly as the car pulled away.

"Yeah."

"Hong. Holding hands. In public."

"People change."

"They really do." Est's voice carried something that might have been wonder. "They really, really do."

We returned to my apartment above the studio, carrying the remaining bags up the narrow stairs. I made coffee because it was late and we both needed caffeine. We sat at my small kitchen table, reviewing final details like generals planning a campaign.

"Cake arrives at noon," Est said, checking his notes. "I'll pick it up. Food delivery is scheduled for five. Decorations need to be set up before Lego arrives, which means —"

"Which means we need someone to keep him busy in the morning."

"Hong volunteered. He's going to take Lego somewhere, give us time to set up."

"Good." I made notes on my phone. "Guest list?"

"Us. Hong. Nut. That's four."

"Small, but right."

"Quality over quantity. People who actually care."

We sat in comfortable silence for a moment. Outside, the city continued its evening routines.

"You know what I keep thinking about?" Est said finally.

"What?"

"The resurrection plant. The one Lego gave me." He stared into his cup. "I keep thinking about how it looked dead—this brown, curled thing. And then you add water, and it unfurls, and it's been alive the whole time. Just waiting."

"What made you think of that now?"

"Lego." Est looked up. "He's been waiting a long time for people to show up. For someone to add the water. And we get to be that for him."

The metaphor landed somewhere deep. This wasn't just a party. It was proof. Evidence that he mattered. Demonstration that chosen family could fill the spaces blood family had left empty.

"I'm not going to mess this up." I said.

"You're not going to mess this up," Est agreed. "And even if something goes wrong, it won't matter. Because you're there. That's what he needs most."

Day Two: The Anticipation

The morning arrived with restless energy.

I was awake before my alarms—eighteen of them, set at staggered intervals, now unnecessary. Sleep had been fragmented, interrupted by dreams I couldn't remember but that left me feeling anxious. By the time the sun was up, I'd already showered, dressed, and reviewed the schedule three times.

The studio opened at ten. Clients arrived and were served. Between appointments, I checked my phone obsessively—for delivery confirmations, for messages from Hong, for anything that might signal disaster.

The decorations arrived at eleven.

The delivery driver handed over boxes containing everything Hong had ordered— hearts in multiple sizes, stars that caught the light, a banner in soft pastels spelling Happy Birthday. I carried everything up to my apartment, adding to the growing pile of party supplies.

The cake arrived at noon.

Est came up the stairs carrying the box with both hands. When he set it on my counter and lifted the lid, I stopped breathing.

It was perfect.

Star-shaped—five points decorated with swirls of pastel-colored frosting in pink and lavender and mint green. Edible flowers dotted the surface: tiny roses, delicate petals. In elegant script across the center: Happy 20th Birthday, Lego.

"They outdid themselves." Est said.

"It's incredible."

We moved the cake to the refrigerator. Then I went back to work, trying to focus on clients while my mind remained fixed on the countdown.

Hong texted at two: On our way to the studio.

The message made something in my chest tighten. Hong was bringing Lego—not for the party, not yet, but for a regular visit. Part of the plan to avoid suspicion, to keep everything normal until tomorrow's surprise. By the time I finished with my current client and walked them out, Hong and Lego were coming through the door.

Lego was wearing the compression knee brace. That was the first thing I noticed—the black fabric visible below his clothes. The sight made my chest tighten with concern. Was he hurt? Was he pushing himself too hard?

Then I noticed his other knee—the one without the brace—and the bruising there. Purple-yellow shadows that spoke of impact, of collision.

And then I noticed the rest of him.

He was wearing a thin, worn long-sleeved shirt with a kitten design—the kind of clothing that looked loved rather than new. His pants were wide-legged and ripped, revealing glimpses of his knees through artful tears. They sat low on his hips—low enough that I could see a faint strip of the band of his underwear.

I dragged my attention away from that detail because this was not the time.

But I cataloged it anyway. Filed it away in the part of my brain that was constantly collecting information about him—the way he moved, the way he dressed, the way he occupied space like he was apologizing for taking up room.

Lego spotted me before I could compose myself. His face lit up with that particular brightness he reserved for moments when he was genuinely happy.

He ran toward me.

He crossed the studio in quick steps that made his loose pants flutter. He threw himself into my arms without hesitation, without checking to see if anyone was watching—and there were people watching, a couple of girls browsing the clothing section. He wrapped his arms around my neck, standing on his tiptoes, pressing himself against me with the intensity of someone who had missed being touched.

"P'Tui!" The sound that came from him was almost like a purr—a small noise of contentment that vibrated against my skin. "I missed you." he murmured against my neck.

"I missed you too."

I'd meant to be careful today. Meant to keep a professional distance, to avoid any behavior that might tip him off about tomorrow's surprise. But with him in my arms, all those intentions dissolved. I pulled him closer, buried my face in his hair, breathed in the scent of him—something floral from the shop, something sweet underneath, something that was just Lego. Then I pressed a kiss to his cheek, soft and quick.

"Get a room." Hong said from behind us, but his voice was amused rather than annoyed.

Lego pulled back slightly, his face still close to mine, eyes bright with happiness. "He's just jealous because P'Nut isn't here."

Hong's ears went pink. I saw him glance at his phone—probably checking for messages from exactly that person.

"Do you have work today?" I asked, when Lego had finally released me.

He moved to settle into one of the armchairs near the reception desk, folding his legs beneath him in that particular way he had. Hong took the chair beside him.

"Nope," Lego said, reaching for one of the mints we kept on the side table. "I'm going to William's apartment later."

The name landed like a small weight in my chest. William. The artist who had

broken Est. The recluse who had screamed at Est in his studio. I hadn't heard the name in weeks. Something in my expression must have showed, because Lego's face flickered with understanding. He knew the history. Knew what William had done.

Hong jumped in immediately.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" he asked, the question too casual, too deliberate. "I was thinking we could hang out. Do something fun."

"Tomorrow?" Lego tilted his head. "I don't have work. What did you have in mind?"

"Coffee. Maybe some shopping. There's a new tea place near the university I've been wanting to try."

I was internally grateful for Hong's smooth redirect. This was his mission—keeping Lego distracted tomorrow morning while we decorated. He was handling it perfectly.

"That sounds nice," Lego said. "I could use a break. Rehearsals have been intense."

"The knee brace?"

"Just prevention. Nothing serious." Lego waved a dismissive hand. "The choreography is hard on the joints."

"And the bruises?"

Lego looked down at his knees, at the purple-yellow shadows. Something crossed his face—not quite embarrassment, but close.

"I fell during practice yesterday. Got the sequence wrong and went down hard." He smiled, the expression not quite reaching his eyes. "It happens."

I wanted to press harder. Wanted to wrap him in protective layers until nothing could hurt him. But I could see in his face that he didn't want to talk about it.

So I let it go. For now.

"Hong's exhibition is coming up," I said, changing the subject. "Eight days."

Hong's posture shifted. "Seven days, actually."

"Seven days." I whistled softly. "Are you ready?"

"No." Hong's voice was flat, but there was humor underneath. "But I'm going to do it anyway."

"That's the plan."

Lego was watching Hong with that particular attention he brought to people he

cared about. "You're nervous." Lego said.

"Terrified," Hong admitted. "But also excited. Both things at once."

"That's how you know it matters."

They talked for a while longer—about the exhibition, about the paintings, about the terror and thrill of putting your soul on display. I listened without contributing much, content to watch them find connection. Eventually, Lego stood to leave. He had to get to William's apartment. Every time he moved, I found myself tracking him—memorizing the particular way he existed in space, the way the light caught in his hair, the expressions that flickered across his face as he scrolled through his phone.

I loved watching him. Loved the unguarded moments when he thought no one was looking—the way he bit his lip when something on his screen amused him, the way he tucked his legs beneath him in that comfortable curl, the way he sometimes looked up and caught me staring and smiled like I was exactly who he wanted to see.

He'd done that for months now. Looked at me like I was something special, something worth looking at. And I'd been so focused on my fear, my work, my carefully maintained distance that I'd almost missed what was right in front of me.

Not anymore.

I walked him to the door, stealing one more moment of privacy.

He hugged me goodbye—longer than necessary, his face pressed against my neck, his breath warm on my skin. The physical intimacy of it still startled me sometimes—the easy way he touched me, the assumption that touch was welcome, the complete absence of the hesitation that had defined my life for so long.

"See you tomorrow?" he asked.

"Tomorrow." I confirmed.

And then, because I couldn't help myself, because the words felt necessary: "Happy early birthday."

He froze in my arms.

Just for a moment—a heartbeat of stillness that told me everything I needed to know about how little he expected. How many birthdays had passed without anyone remembering? How many years of being overlooked? Then he relaxed, pulling back to look at me with an expression I couldn't quite read.

"You remembered." His voice was quiet, almost wondering.

"Of course I remembered."

It was mostly a lie. I'd forgotten and been reminded and spent the last day in panic trying to fix my failure. But he didn't need to know that. He just needed to know that tomorrow would be different.

"I have to go," he said, but he didn't move.

"I know."

"I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too."

He kissed me—quick and soft, barely more than a brush of lips—and then he was gone, disappearing through the studio door into the afternoon light. I watched him go. Watched the empty space where he'd been. Felt the ache of his absence settle into my bones.

But there was no time for aching. There was work to do.

"Tomorrow," Hong said from behind me. "Tomorrow we make it count."

"Tomorrow," I agreed. "We give him something worth remembering."

Day Three: The Surprise

The morning of Lego's birthday arrived with clarity and purpose. I woke early—not from anxiety this time, but from anticipation. The kind of energy that pulled you out of sleep and into action, that made every moment feel weighted with significance.

Today was the day.

The first texts came at 9 AM.

Hong: On my way to Lego's. He's probably still asleep, Will keep him busy until evening.

The morning passed in a blur of preparation. I brought the decorations down from my apartment, spreading them across the studio's main area. Hearts in shades of pink and lavender. Stars that caught the light and scattered it across the walls.

Est arrived, his camera already around his neck, carrying additional supplies he'd acquired somewhere. Together, we worked with methodical precision—streamers across the ceiling, creating a canopy of soft colors. The banner above the reception desk, its glittery letters catching the light. Balloons clustered in corners and floating on ribbons, their pastel shades perfect against the studio's darker aesthetic.

I thought about Lego as we worked. Thought about his face when he would walk through the door. Thought about the difference between receiving an expensive bag in the mail and walking into a room full of people who had spent hours making

something beautiful just for you.

That's was what I wanted to give him. Not just the party, not just the gifts. The proof that he was worth the effort. The evidence that someone had been paying attention.

"Higher," I said, pointing at a string of stars. "The banner should be the first thing he sees when he walks in."

"You're being very particular about this."

"It has to be right."

Est smiled, climbing the ladder to adjust the placement. "It will be. He's going to love it."

Nut arrived at 3:30, carrying a ridiculous cloud of pastel balloons that filled the studio doorway. He had to navigate carefully to avoid losing them.

"Is this too many?" he asked, slightly breathless.

"There's no such thing as too many balloons."

We distributed them around the room—clusters in corners, individual balloons tied to chairs, a massive bunch near the cake table. The studio was transforming into something unrecognizable, something that looked like a celebration rather than a place where art happened.

By 5, everything was ready. The food had arrived—containers arranged on tables, drinks chilling in coolers, plates and napkins set out with care. The cake was positioned on the main table, still hidden under a cover until the moment of reveal. Flowers—sunflowers that I'd ordered specially, because Lego always talked about how much he loved them—dominated the centerpiece.

"He's going to cry." Est observed.

"Good crying or bad crying?"

"Good crying. Overwhelmed-with-love crying. The Lego special."

"I can handle that."

"You'd better. You're the one who'll be holding him when it happens."

The thought of holding him through tears—happy tears, the kind that came from being surprised by love—made something in my chest expand. I wanted to give him that. Wanted to be the person who made him feel so loved that he couldn't contain it.

We gathered near the door, checking phones, waiting.

Est had his camera ready. Nut was fidgeting nervously. I was trying to breathe normally and mostly failing.

What if he didn't like it?

What if it was too much, too overwhelming?

What if I'd gotten everything wrong?

The doubts spiraled, but before they could take hold, my phone buzzed.

Hong: Five minutes out.

The anticipation was almost unbearable—the particular tension of a surprise about to be revealed, of all our planning about to meet its purpose.

Hong: Two minutes.

Hong: We're here.

The door opened.

Hong came through first, his expression carrying the particular satisfaction of someone who had successfully completed a mission. Behind him—Lego.

He stepped into the studio and stopped.

His face went through a journey I would never forget. Confusion first. Then recognition. Then the slow, overwhelming realization of what he was looking at—the decorations, the balloons, the banner with his name on it, the flowers, the people who had gathered specifically for him.

"SURPRISE!"

The word came from all of us at once—not quite coordinated, overlapping in a chaos of enthusiasm. Est's camera clicked rapidly, capturing the moment.

"You—" His voice cracked. "You all—"

When Lego's gaze found mine, his eyes were already wet.

"Surprise," I said, softer now. "Happy birthday, Lego."

He didn't speak. For a long moment, he just stood there, processing, his hands coming up to cover his mouth. Then he moved—crossing the studio in quick steps, his whole body oriented toward me like I was the sun he was turning to face.

He threw himself into my arms, and I caught him.

His whole body was shaking—tears or joy or some combination. He pressed his face against my shoulder, the way he always did when he needed to be close.

"You did this?" His voice was muffled. "For me?"

"For you." I held him close. "With a lot of help. Everyone contributed."

"But you—"

"I remembered." The lie came easier now. "I told you I would."

He pulled back, his face wet with tears, his smile radiant despite the crying.

"This is the most beautiful thing anyone has ever done for me."

I wanted to tell him he deserved more. He deserved a lifetime of birthdays like this. He deserved to never spend another celebration alone. But words felt inadequate. So instead, I leaned down and kissed him. Not quick and soft this time. Real. Deliberate. The kind of kiss that said I'm here and I see you and you matter.

When we pulled apart, everyone was watching. Est was smiling behind his camera. Hong was trying to look dignified and failing. Nut was grinning like he'd just witnessed something wonderful.

"Happy birthday." I said again.

Lego laughed—a watery, overwhelmed sound. "Happy birthday to me."

The party unfolded organically, without agenda.

We gathered around the food, filling plates with everything Hong had ordered. Lego exclaimed over every dish—the pasta he loved, the spring rolls, the desserts someone had added because "birthday parties need excessive sugar." Est moved through the space with his camera, documenting everything. He was comfortable in a way I hadn't seen from him in months—his smile genuine, his attention present.

The resurrection plant was working. He was coming back to life.

Hong stood near Nut, their shoulders almost touching, their conversation a low murmur. At one point, Hong laughed—actually laughed, the sound surprising in its unreservedness—and Nut's face did something tender in response.

The gifts came after the food.

We'd arranged them on a small table—wrapped packages that represented hours of thought and care. Lego approached them with the particular hesitation of someone who wasn't used to receiving things, who had learned not to expect.

"You didn't have to—"

"We wanted to," Hong said. "That's the point."

Est's gift was first—a Care Bears blanket in soft pastels, the kind of thing that would fit perfectly into Lego's apartment of soft things.

"I remembered you mentioning that your old one was getting worn out," Est explained. "This one should last longer."

Lego held the blanket against his chest, his expression soft. "It's perfect. Thank you."

Hong's gift was next—a sketchbook with high-quality paper, the kind artists used for serious work.

"For choreography notes," Hong said. "Or whatever else you want. The pages are blank. You get to decide what they become."

Nut's gift was small but thoughtful—a set of keychains featuring Japanese characters like the ones Lego always had on his bag.

"Hong mentioned you collected these," Nut said, slightly nervous. "I hope I got the right ones."

Lego examined each keychain with genuine delight. "These are from my favorite show! How did you know?"

"Hong told me."

Lego shot Hong a look that was both grateful and teasing. "You've been sharing my secrets."

"Only the good ones."

And then it was my turn.

I retrieved the wrapped package from where I'd hidden it behind the main table. The pale pink paper was still perfectly smooth, the white ribbon still perfectly tied. Lego took it with careful hands, his expression shifting to curiosity as he began to unwrap.

The paper fell away.

The Alice in Wonderland tea set emerged—the whimsical cups with their pastel colors, their delicate illustrations. Lego made a sound that was somewhere between a gasp and a sob.

"Tui—" His voice cracked. "These are—"

"I noticed your old set was wearing out. One of the cups was missing." I moved

closer, taking his hands in mine. "You mentioned it once. That you kept meaning to find a replacement but nothing matched."

His eyes were overflowing now, tears tracking down his cheeks.

"You were listening."

"I'm always listening." I brushed a tear from his cheek with my thumb. "You gave me tea that blooms. Tea that taught me to wait for beautiful things. I wanted to give you something back. Something that said I see you."

Lego set the cup down carefully and then he was in my arms again—not just hugging but clinging, his whole body pressed against mine, his face buried in my neck.

"I love you," he said, the words muffled but clear. "I love you so much it scares me."

"I love you too." I tightened my arms around him. "And I'm not going anywhere."

The cake came out as the light began to change.

We'd lit candles—twenty of them, flickering like tiny prayers. Lego sat in the chair of honor, surrounded by everyone who had gathered for him, watching the flames dance.

"Make a wish." Est said.

"A good one." Hong added.

Lego closed his eyes. His lips moved slightly—forming the wish in his mind, giving it shape before releasing it.

Then he blew.

The candles flickered and surrendered—all twenty going dark in a single breath. Everyone cheered. Someone started a terrible rendition of the birthday song, and we all joined in.

"What did you wish for?"

"I can't tell you." But Lego was smiling—that particular smile he got when he was keeping a secret. "Ask me in a year."

The cake was cut. Slices were distributed. The star shape meant some pieces were oddly proportioned, but no one minded.

"This is incredible," Lego said, mouth full. "How did you even find this bakery?"

"Est has connections." I said.

"Apparently being a photographer means knowing everyone."

"It helps." Est agreed.

As the evening deepened, the party settled into something quieter.

Est left first, after hugs and promises to text. "I have an early shoot tomorrow, but this was worth losing sleep for."

Nut and Hong left together, their hands finding each other as they walked toward the door.

Hong paused before leaving, catching my eye.

"You did good." he said quietly.

"I had help."

"You still did good."

Then they were gone, and it was just Lego and me. The studio was quiet now. The decorations still cast their gentle glow. Balloons drifted lazily in the air currents. The evidence of celebration surrounded us. Lego was curled up on one of the waiting chairs, looking smaller than he usually seemed. He was holding one of the new cups, turning it in his hands, studying the illustrations.

"Thank you," he said softly. "For all of this."

"You deserve it."

"Do I?" The question was genuine, not fishing for reassurance. "Sometimes I'm not sure what I deserve."

I crossed the room and knelt in front of him, taking his hands in mine.

"You deserve to be seen. You deserve to be celebrated. You deserve people who show up—not because they have to, but because they want to. Because being around you makes everything better."

His eyes were wet again. "Tui—"

"Your parents sent a box." I kept my voice gentle. "A card and a gift, mailed from wherever they are. And that's... it's something. But it's not enough. It's not what you deserve."

"I know."

"This—" I gestured at the decorated studio. "This is what you deserve. People who actually care. People who want to be here."

A tear slid down his cheek. "I've spent so many birthdays alone. Or with just William, which sometimes felt almost as lonely. I learned to not expect anything, to treat it like just another day, because expecting things only led to disappointment."

"Not anymore." I reached up to cup his face, wiping the tear away with my thumb. "From now on, your birthdays will be different. I'll make sure of it."

"You promise?"

"I promise. Every birthday. Every ordinary day. Every moment that matters and every moment that doesn't. I'm going to be there."

He set down the cup and leaned into me, his forehead pressing against mine. We stayed like that for a long moment—breathing the same air, existing in the same space, not needing to speak.

"Can I stay with you tonight?" he whispered eventually. "I don't want this to end yet."

"As long as you want."

"Forever?"

The word hung in the air between us—too big and too small at the same time. Too soon and not soon enough.

"Ask me again in a year," I said. "When you've had more birthdays with people who show up. When you've seen what it's like to be loved properly. Ask me then, and I'll give you a better answer."

Lego laughed—soft, wondering. "That's not a no."

"It's definitely not a no."

He kissed me then—not quick this time, not tentative. Deep and real and full of everything we were still learning to say to each other. When we finally separated, the studio had grown darker around us. The city continued its evening rhythms outside the windows. The decorations swayed gently in air currents we couldn't feel.

I pressed a kiss to his hair. "I'll always show up for you. Even when I mess up—even when I forget things I shouldn't forget—I'll always find a way to make it right."

He tilted his face up to look at me. "Did you forget? At first?"

The question caught me off guard. I could lie—could maintain the illusion that I'd been planning this for weeks, that the party had been organized well in advance, that I'd never lost track of something so important.

But I didn't want to lie to him. Not anymore. Not ever again.

"Yes." I admitted. "I forgot. Hong's gift bag reminded me yesterday morning, and I spent the next thirty-six hours in a panic trying to fix it."

He was quiet for a moment, processing this. "You forgot." Not accusatory—just stating a fact.

"I forgot. The design consumed me. I lost track of everything that wasn't those damn flowers." I held his gaze, letting him see the guilt I still carried. "I'm sorry. I should have done better."

"But you fixed it."

"I tried to."

"You threw me a surprise party." A small smile was tugging at his lips. "You bought me an Alice in Wonderland tea set. You made me feel—" His voice cracked slightly. "You made me feel like I mattered. More than I've ever felt in my life."

"You do matter. More than anything."

"Hong's exhibition," Lego said, after a while. "Seven days."

"Seven days."

"We're all going?"

"Of course. That's what family does. Shows up for each other."

Lego smiled—the particular smile he got when something made him genuinely happy. "I like that, Family."

"Chosen family."

"The best kind."

I helped him up from the chair, kept his hand in mine as we moved through the studio. The cleanup could wait until tomorrow. Tonight was for something else. We went upstairs to my apartment. Lego had been here before—knew where everything was, moved through the space with the familiarity of someone who was becoming part of it. I made tea—using the new cups, handling them with care. We sat on my small couch, close enough that our shoulders touched, watching the city lights through the window.

"This was the best birthday I've ever had." Lego said quietly.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Not because of the presents. Not even because of the party." He leaned his head against my shoulder. "Because everyone was there. Everyone showed up. And

I didn't have to pretend to be okay with being alone."

"You never have to pretend with us."

"I'm starting to believe that."

We sat in comfortable silence, the tea warming our hands. Outside, Bangkok continued its endless motion. Eventually, Lego's breathing changed—deepened, slowed. The exhaustion of the day catching up with him. I sat there, holding him, watching the light change as evening turned to night.

This was what love looked like. Not grand gestures—though those mattered too. But the small choices. The showing up. The staying when it would be easier to leave. I'd spent years afraid of this. Afraid of connection, of vulnerability, of the pain that came from letting someone close enough to matter. But this wasn't pain. This was warmth. This was peace. This was a boy asleep against my shoulder, surrounded by evidence of celebration, finally learning what it felt like to be loved properly.

Seven days until Hong's exhibition. Seven days of ordinary life, of work and routines and small moments. But for now, there was only this.

Lego shifted in his sleep, his hand finding mine even in unconsciousness. The grip was loose, relaxed—the grip of someone who wasn't afraid.

I was learning to show up. We were learning together.

And that was everything.

That was the real gift. Not the tea set, not the party, not even the words we'd exchanged. The gift was showing up. Being present. Proving that love wasn't just a feeling—it was a choice, made over and over again, in the small moments and the large ones, on birthdays and ordinary days.

I was going to choose him every day. And as sleep finally claimed me, I knew with absolute certainty that he would choose me too.

I stayed because he asked me to, because I wanted to, because this was what love looked like when you finally stopped running from it. I stayed, and it felt like home.